
Chapter 15

Finnish-American Music in Superiorland

Program 15 Performances

1. Hugo Maki, "Itin Tiltu." 2. Viola Turpeinen and John Rosendahl, "Viulu polkka." 3. Leo Kauppi, "Villi ruusu." 4. Walt Johnson, "Villi ruusu." 5. Hiski Salomaa, "Lannen lokkari." 6. Oulu Hotshots, "Sakki jarven polkka." 7. Oulu Hotshots, "Maailman Matti." 8. Bobby Aro, "Highway Number 7." 9. Oulu Hotshots, "Raatikko."

The Finnish-American Homeland

From the 1880s through the first two decades of the twentieth century, more than three hundred thousand Finns emigrated to the United States, where jobs could be found chiefly in mills, mines, factories, fisheries, and lumber camps. Roughly half were drawn to the Lake Superior region, settling in the western half of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, across Wisconsin's northern counties, and throughout northern Minnesota. When they could buy land, many scratched out an existence on small farms.

These settlers and their offspring, like other newcomers to America, continued their old-country musical traditions. Hymns and social dance music were performed in homes, but institutions that fostered music were thriving by the 1920s. Suomi Synod Lutheran churches, allied with Finland's state church, established choirs, while members of the charismatic Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church composed new hymns and adapted American gospel songs. Temperance societies and socialists built halls where musical plays and social dances were common. Cooperative stores sold musical instruments and, eventually, phonographs and Finnish-American recordings. Meanwhile ethnic newspapers advertised and reported on musical events.

The Girl Played like a Heavenly Bell

Finnish-American social dance musicians and singers took particular advantage of this institutional infrastructure. Foremost among them was Viola Turpeinen, who dominated Finnish-American musical life from the mid-1920s until her death in 1958, and whose legacy persists. Viola Irene Turpeinen was born November 15, 1909, in Champion, Michigan, west of Ishpeming, the eldest of Walter and Signe Wiitala Turpeinen's four daughters. Like many men of his generation, Walter Turpeinen was a miner, who followed his occupation to Iron River, Michigan, shortly after Viola's birth.

Portions of this essay are drawn from J. P. Leary, 1990, "The Legacy of Viola Turpeinen," Finnish Americana 8:6-11. With permission.

Both Walter and Signe played the *kaks rivinen*, or two-row button accordion, an instrument popularized in Finland in the late nineteenth century. Viola soon learned to push-pull a melody and by her early teens she had graduated to the more expensive, versatile, and prestigious piano accordion. She was soon entertaining locally at both the Finnish Labor Hall and the Italians' Bruno Hall. In 1925 sixteen-year-old Viola attracted the attention of John Rosendahl, a musician and concert promoter. With her father traveling along as chaperon, she set off for the Duluth/Superior area on the first of many tours.

By 1927 Turpeinen and Rosendahl shifted their base of operations to New York City. As an eastern port, New York was America's closest link to Finland, a place from which to embark on tours and a conduit for news from the old country. The city's Finnish-American population supported several halls where Turpeinen and Rosendahl found regular employment as part of a company of entertainers offering plays, concerts, and dances. New York was also home to large record companies like Columbia and Victor, which began actively recording ethnic-American musicians in the late 1920s.

In January 1928, Viola Turpeinen and John Rosendahl recorded six numbers for Victor: three waltzes, two polkas, and a schottische, with Viola on accordion and John trading off on violin and banjo. The first record from that session, "Emma valssi" backed with "Kauhavan polkka," was released in May 1928 and reissued two years later. "Kauhavan polkka" is among the pair's most memorable collaborations: a searing, typically fast-paced Finnish polka, with accordion and violin interweaving relentlessly as if to push one another to the border between deft articulation and abandon; the kind of tune that reminds one that fiddlers of legend acquire their powers from the devil, and that accordionists sometimes work their instruments until the bellows pull apart. Over the next three years, Turpeinen and Rosendahl recorded four duets for Columbia and nine for Victor, while Viola cut five accordion solos for Victor.

Viola Turpeinen continued to record until the early 1950s with a number of different musicians, including her eventual husband William Syrjala of Cloquet, Minnesota, and Sylvia Polso of the Ironwood/Hurley area. Although she never again lived in the Upper Midwest, later moving from New York City to Lake Worth, Florida, Turpeinen returned on annual tours. Newspaper accounts, like this one written in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, in 1931, describe the sort of program that was typical of that era's ethnic-American vaudeville circuit.

Following a musical number by Miss Turpeinen and Miss Polso on the accordions, and Mr. Rosendahl on the violin, slides of Finland were shown. A scene showing the harvest time in Finland seemed very similar to pictures of the Canadian West during harvest time, and showed the similarity of the methods used in both countries. Mr. Rosendahl explained each scene, in Finnish, as it appeared on the screen.

Miss Turpeinen and Miss Polso both gave solos on the accordion, which drew hearty applause from the audience, which demanded encores. Miss Turpeinen, who is well known here through former appearances, is one of the Victor record artists and has made many popular records.

Mr. Rosendahl, on the violin, played an old folk song, and gave a very humorous speech. Another solo by Miss Turpeinen which was very well received concluded the first part of the program.

After the intermission, during which coffee was served by the ladies, dancing was enjoyed until midnight, the music being furnished by the three visitors. (Polso n.d.)



Reino Maki playing the button accordion, Washburn, 1979 Photo: Matthew Gallmann

It was the dancing “until midnight” that lives on in the memories of those who were there and in the imagination of more than a few who were not. Indeed reminiscent sessions on Turpeinen have become a part of the annual gathering of Finnish Americans, Finn Fest.

Viola Turpeinen was a “local girl” who left the Upper Midwest for New York City, was lauded in newspaper advertisements as a “Victor Recording Artist,” and was acclaimed on musical tours to Finland. Yet she always returned to the region of her youth. In the late twentieth century, upper midwestern Finns Oren Tikkanen and Al Reko continue to perform Antti Syrjaniemi’s 1928 celebration of a Turpeinen dance.

Seldom have people danced the polka at such speed;
Seldom have people stepped more rapidly.
When grandmas asked grandpas for a break,
They say they were already wet with sweat.
And the girl played like a heavenly bell,
Hittan tila tila hittantaa.
And farmers danced like mowers making hay in
the fields.
Hittan tila tila hittantaa.

(Reko and Tikkanen P; Syrjaniemi 1928 P)

Al Reko and dozens of Finnish-American accordionists still hear the "heavenly bell" of Turpeinen's accordion and their hands ring out her tunes.

The Oulu Hotshots of Bayfield County, Wisconsin, carry on Viola Turpeinen's musical legacy as well as any. Named for the northernmost province of Finland, Oulu was once the most densely settled agricultural community in Wisconsin (Kolehmainen and Hill 1951:53). By the 1920s, Oulu's Finnish settlers had raised a crop of accordion players and built several Finnish halls. Walter and Ailie Johnson, who first saw Turpeinen play in Oulu in 1925, began entertaining at local dances in the 1930s (Johnson 1988 I).

When they began slowing down in the 1970s, the Oulu Hotshots—Bill Kangas and Glen and LeRoy Lahti—were coming into their own. Although the accordion-playing Lahti brothers were born after Viola Turpeinen's death, their father, Rodney, encouraged them to play her music. He has never forgotten Turpeinen's summer visits to northern Wisconsin. "It was like heaven going to her dances" (Lahti 1988 I).